DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 223 966 CG 016 375

AUTHOR Herzberger, Sharon D.; Tennen, Howard A.
TITLE The Social Definition of Child Abuse.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; College Students; Higher Education; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Background; *Parent Child Relationship; Social Attitudes; *Social Behavior

ABSTRACT

The lack of uniform definition of child abuse has caused researchers and practitioners to center debate on whether abuse should be defined according to the characteristics of the parental act or its consequences to the child. To examine how the situational context and the characteristics of the individual applying the label of abuse affect judgments of abusive and nonabusive disciplinary interactions, male (N=62) and female (N=70) students read vignettes describing emotional and physical disciplinary interactions between parents and children and were asked to judge them based on different criteria, e.g., severity of the interaction, appropriateness of the parental act, and whether the act was abusive or nonabusive. Half of the participants were told of a provocative act by the child which preceded the discipline. Results indicated that subjects who were treated similarly as children generally judged the punishment to be less severe and not abusive. Results also supported the hypothesis that awareness of the child's behavior would mitigate judgments of the parent's response. The findings suggest that the failure to condemn abusive treatment may contribute to the increased incidence of abuse among parents who were abused as children. In addition, the findings suggest that abuse cannot be objectively defined, and that it is judged in accordance with the social context. (PAS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED223966

THE SOCIAL DEFINITION OF CHILD ABUSE

Sharon D. Herzberger
Trinity College

Howard A. Tennen
University of Connecticut Health Center

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sharon Herzberger

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 016375

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982.

Introduction

A uniform definition of "child abuse" has alluded researchers and practitioners. Debate has centered on whether abuse should be defined according to the characteristics of the parental act or its consequences to the child (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979). Labeling an act as abusive may also depend upon the situational context and upon the characteristics of the individual who applies the label. This study examined how the latter two factors affect judgments of abusive and nonabusive disciplinary interactions. We asked two questions: First, does past exposure to similar punishment affect judgments about abusive and nonabusive disciplinary interactions? Clinical interviewers (e.g., Kempe & Kempe, 1978) often report that individuals who have been abused perceive such treatment as rightful and deserved. However, other research has shown that abused children may admit to deserving punishment, but not abuse (Herzberger, Potts, & Dillon, 1981). We might also hypothesize that people with similar treatment may be more able to empathize with the child victim and thus may in general reject the parent's behavior. This study sought to test these contrasting predictions.

Second, does knowledge of the child's provocation affect judgments about parental discipline? One might suggest that awareness of the parental act and its consequences is sufficient to judge whether a parent committed abuse. Injuring a child while banging him/her against a wall is abusive, regardless of the context in which the punishment occurred. However, moral codes, as well as our system of justice, are based upon the notions of reciprocity and extenuating circumstances. Hence, knowledge of contextual factors, such as the child's precipitating behavior, may well affect judgments about the parent's action.

Method

Male (n=62) and female (n=70) students read 8 vignettes, each describing a disciplinary interaction between parent and child (see sample stories in Table 1). Four vignettes described emotional discipline and four described physical discipline. Two emotional and two physical vignettes describe discipline that was considered by pilot subjects to be "severe;" the remaining four described acts that were considered "moderate." Half of the disciplinary acts (one of each type), involved a son; half involved a daughter. Finally, half of the participants were informed of a provocative act by the child which preceded the discipline; the other half of the participants were not informed of the child's behavior.

Participants were asked to read each vignette and to judge: (1) the severity and (2) appropriateness of the parental act, (3) the likelihood that the act would increase/decrease the child's misbehavior, (4) the likelihood that the act would produce a positive/negative effect on the child's emotional development, (5) whether the act was "abusive" or "not abusive", and (6) the degree to which the act was the parent's versus the child's responsibility (see Table 2). Participants were then asked to reread each vignette and to note whether they had received similar disciplinary treatment from their own parents. Following this, participants were debriefed.

Results

T-tests were performed on each vignette comparing the judgments of participants who reported similar parental treatment versus those who did not. Subjects with similar treatment judged it less harshly than subjects without similar treatment (see Table 3). Subjects who were treated similarly generally judged the punishment to be less severe, more appropriate, more likely to decrease future misbehavior, more likely to produce a positive effect on the child's emotional development, and more likely to be the child's responsibility. They also were less likely than others to judge the described act as "abusive."

Second, the judgments of participants who possessed knowledge of the child's provocation were compared to those of participants who lacked such knowledge. Although fewer significant differences were found, the results tended to support the hypothesis that awareness of the child's behavior would mitigate judgments of the parent's response (see Table 4). Participants who were informed of the child's action tended to judge the parent's discipline as less severe, more appropriate, and more the child's responsibility than did other participants.

Discussion

Individuals who have experienced a particular form of treatment judge similar treatment received by others less harshly than do individuals who have not experienced the treatment. The failure to condemn abusive treatment may contribute to the increased incidence of abuse among parents who were abused as children (Straus, 1978). Knowledge of the child's provocation also mitigated judgments of the parental act. The implications of these findings for judicial and administrative decision-making about cases of abuse are obvious: Parental behavior may be deemed more or less harmful, depending upon the amount and type of information available and the characteristics of the decision-maker. This study has demonstrated that abuse cannot be objectively defined; instead it is judged in accordance with the social context.

Giovannoni, J.M. & Becerra, R.M. Defining child abuse. New York: Free Press, 1979.

Herzberger, S.D., Potts, D.A., & Dillon, M. Abusive and nonabusive parental treatment from the child's perspective. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1981, 49, 81-90.

Kempe, R.S. & Kempe, C.H. Child abuse. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Straus, M.A. Family patterns and child abuse in a nationally representative American sample. Paper presented at the Second International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect, London, 1978.

Table 1

Sample Vignettes

Emotional-Moderate

Joanne is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson. One day she was playing a game in the kitchen trying to balance a piece of china on her head. The piece of china slipped off and dropped to the floor shattering into several pieces. Mr. Wilkinson heard the crash and came up from the basement. When he saw what Joanne had done, he punished her by not allowing her to play with her friends for three days.

Emotional-Severe

Diane is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Diane was always teasing the family cat. One day just as she had pulled the cat's tail, Mr. Smith walked in and saw her. He yelled at her, comparing her to her little brother and implying that she is not his child and is unwanted.

Physical-Moderate

Mary is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Culver. One day Mary was out in the garage smoking a cigarette, Mr. Culver caught her when he came out to get something from the car. He took her inside the house and spanked her on the rear end with his hand.

Physical-Severe

Kris is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Jones. One day when Kris was drawing at her desk, she decided to draw a picture on the bedroom wall with crayons. When Mr. Jones saw what she had done, he banged her against the wall several times.

Table 2

Dependent Measures: Judgments
about the Disciplinary Interaction

Severity

To what degree would you regard the parent's response to the child to be severe? (from 1, not at all severe, to 7, extremely severe).

Appropriateness

How appropriate do you think the parent's behavior is? (from 1, not at all appropriate, to 7, perfectly appropriate).

Misbehavior

Rate the extent to which this type of parental response is likely to increase or decrease the child's tendency to misbehave in the future. (from -4, very likely to decrease future misbehavior, to +4, very likely to increase future misbehavior).

Emotional

Rate the extent to which this type of parental response is likely to produce a positive or negative result on the child's emotional development, (from -4, very likely to produce a negative effect on emotional development, to +4, very likely to produce a positive effect on emotional development).

Abuse

Would you regard this parent's behavior as an example of child abuse? (1, no; 2, yes).

Percentage of Child's Responsibility

To what degree is the parent responsible for his/her action? To what degree is the child responsible? (Means represent percentage of responsibility ascribed to child).

Table 3

Judgments Made by Individuals Who Did Not Experience (Not Similar) and Who Did Experience (Similar) Similar Treatment

	Severity		Appropriateness		Misbehavior		Emotional		Abuse		? Child's Responsibility	
Vignette Type	Not Similar	Similar	Not Similar	Similar	Not Similar	Similar	Not Similar	Similar	Not Similar	Similar	Not Similar	Similar
Emotional-Moderate, Son	3.48	3.05*	3.78	4.85	-1.27	-1.85*	- .29	.52**	1.13	1.02	45.20	51.95*
Emotional-Moderate, Daughter	4.09	3.06**	3.24	4.83***	-1.32	-1.83*	- .90	.76***	1.12	1.00***	37.94	52.50**
Emotional-Severe, Son	6.10	6.00	1.36	1.86	.78	1.18	-3.24	-3.21	1.83	1.64*	19.40	19.86
Emotional-Severe, Daughter	6.24	5.87	1.32	1.60	.74	1.00	-3.41	-3.07	1.76	1.73	20.07	22.47
Physical-Moderate, Son	3.91	3.23***	3.11	4.46**	- .48	-1.31**	- .86	- .16**	1.15	1.08	40.57	46.01
Physical-Moderate, Daughter	3.80	3.20***	3.25	4.24**	- .69	-1.54***	- .84	.11***	1.16	1.04*	42.16	48.45
Physical-Severe, Son	6.56	5.86**	1.44	2.36**	- .53	-1.14	-3.07	-1.64***	1.89	1.57**	21.39	36.54**
Physical-Severe Daughter	6.71	5.87***	1.24	2.40***	- .84	- .67	-3.36	-2.93	1.98	1.80	18.87	30.67**

* $p \leq .10$

** $p \leq .05$

*** $p \leq .01$

Table 4

Judgments Made by Individuals Who Were Informed
and Who Were Uninformed About the Child's Provocation

	Severity		Appropriateness		Misbehavior		Emotional		Abuse		% Child's Responsibility	
Vignette Type	Informed	Not Informed	Informed	Not Informed	Informed	Not Informed	Informed	Not Informed	Informed	Not Informed	Informed	Not Informed
Emotional-Moderate, Son	3.10	3.55*	4.17	4.29	-1.54	-1.53	.18	.04	1.07	1.08	53.53	40.56**
Emotional-Moderate, Daughter	3.46	3.96**	3.95	3.76	-1.47	-1.50	.02	-.59*	1.08	1.06	49.37	34.27**
Emotional-Severe, Son	6.01	6.14	1.62	1.29**	.58	1.21	-3.05	-3.41	1.83	1.76	22.36	15.45**
Emotional-Severe, Daughter	6.07	6.41**	1.49	1.16***	.58	1.31*	-3.27	-3.37	1.76	1.72	23.26	15.18**
Physical-Moderate, Son	3.34	3.51	4.20	3.96	-1.02	-1.38	- .18	- .43	1.07	1.14	50.04	35.98**
Physical-Moderate, Daughter	3.27	3.61	3.86	3.92	-1.00	-1.49*	- .21	- .31	1.07	1.12	51.39	37.41**
Physical-Severe, Son	6.42	6.42	1.59	1.56	- .31	- .92	-2.70	-3.14	1.83	1.84	28.87	13.10**
Physical-Severe Daughter	6.57	6.66	1.49	1.26*	- .72	- .92	-3.18	-3.40	1.95	1.96	25.00	11.58**

* $p \leq .10$

** $p \leq .05$

*** $p \leq .01$